Night Murmurs

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Night Murmurs

by Anemones_Of_The_Garden

Summary

Will Graham has been brought to the Chesapeake Manor by a job opening for a new resident mechanic. The aging house has many mysteries, but none more intriguing than the owner himself, Mr. Lecter. With a keen sense for danger and a knack for uncovering people's secrets, Will can't help the temptation. As he spends the summer fixing up the manor and learning more about its residents, he inevitably draws closer to the beating heart of the Chesapeake Manor, and the demons lurking in its shadows.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

The grand entrance of the Chesapeake Manor loomed above Will like a hungry lion, waiting to swallow him up. It was an ancient house with a particular style. A little gothic, with its pointed arches and slender columns. Yet unable to escape the look and feel of a country home in a small town.

Will had been brought to the manor by a job posting in Wolf Trap, citing the need for an on-site mechanic. He was honestly surprised things hadn't started breaking sooner, given the building was well over a hundred years old.

The Chesapeake was known for its lavish parties and excellent food, but it was a rare occurrence to actually see anyone from the manor in town. Consequently, he knew almost nothing about the owner, or any of the servants.

Odd jobs had paid his bills for the past few months, going from door to door fixing up homes. It would be good to have somewhere to settle, at least for the summer.

Will raised his hand and knocked on the door, but for a long moment no one answered.

He brought his hand back up, preparing to knock a second time, when the door suddenly swung open. A stout man with wiry hair inspected him, his eyes roaming over the state of Will's outdated, and admittedly unflattering, suit.

The man hummed, then said, "He won't like that."

"Will Graham," he introduced, choosing to ignore the butler's remark. He wouldn't be charming the owner of the Chesapeake Manor with his clothes. "I'm here for an interview."

"Please, come inside," the man said, allowing him entry.

Will stepped inside and let the man take his coat. The entryway was large and dome-like, as if encapsulating them within a vault. Intricate wood carvings marked the rails on the winding staircase that led to the second floor. Will craned his neck up, but only managed to gain a view of closed doors and long hallways.

"Mr. Graham."

He turned to find a maid waiting for him.

"I'll show you to Mr. Lecter," she said, offering him a shy smile. Will returned it, and followed her down the hall. He glanced over his shoulder to find the butler watching them, his expression carefully guarded.

Will forced himself to focus as they approached a tall auburn door. He often saw strange things in other people's eyes. Distracting things, like the depression reeking off the man who had paid him to fix his thirty year old boat last week. Distressing things, like the nervous

glances from the man's daughter, who Will suspected was having an affair with her father's brother.

The maid opened the door and ushered him inside.

Will looked around the room, suddenly feeling as if he'd walked into a sticky trap meant for gnats and crawling insects. He wiggled his shoes to make sure the sensation wasn't real, then turned his gaze to the man sitting center stage, in a velvet chair nicer than any Will had ever seen.

"Mr. Graham," said Mr. Lecter, gesturing for him to take a seat on the opposite side of a grand mahogany desk.

He obliged, crossing the distance between them and sitting down.

"I'm glad you could make it," continued Mr. Lecter, assessing him with a quick scan. Will straightened his jacket and ruffled a hand through his curls, feeling self conscious. There was something about the man's eyes that wanted to reel him in and drown him, like a riptide pulling children out to sea.

"I appreciate your hospitality," Will replied.

Mr. Lecter smiled, and said, "There are quite a few things in need of repair around the house. In your application, you mentioned having a background in mechanical restoration."

"Boat motors, electrical wiring, anything with moving parts or an engine," he said, scratching the back of his neck. A pesky tag was sticking out from the collar of his jacket.

"Have you been working in the village?" the man asked, fixing him with a curious look.

"Mostly outside the village, actually," said Will. "The homes on the outskirts don't have access to mechanics like they do in town, so I usually take my business there."

"Charitable," he said, looking as though he wanted to add *but not the whole truth.* "And what of your living situation?"

"I was hoping there might be a spare room at the manor," said Will, suddenly hesitant. "But I can always find somewhere else -"

"It won't be a problem," Mr. Lecter interrupted, looking pleased with his answer.

"Who would I be reporting to, sir?" asked Will. "If you hire me for the job."

"You will be reporting directly to me," said Mr. Lecter, opening a drawer behind his desk and retrieving a bundle of papers. He pushed them across the desk, and said, "The job is yours, Mr. Graham, if you wish to accept the offer."

Will's eyebrows shot up. The meeting had barely started.

"You're sure?"

“Quite sure.”

Will stared down at the dotted line awaiting his signature. The odd look from the butler resurfaced as he studied the terms, looking for any clauses that might somehow bind him into servitude for the rest of his life.

“Is everything to your liking?” asked Mr. Lecter. He looked almost amused.

“It appears so,” said Will, unable to find anything amiss. The interview sat strangely with him, but there was no reason to turn down a job he desperately needed. Mr. Lecter was different from his other employers, certainly. Far richer than most of them. But it was the look behind Lecter’s eyes which made Will hesitate. The glimpse of something hiding in the shadows, not allowing itself to be seen just yet.

He picked up the offered pen and held it just above the paper. Will felt certain there was something amiss with the house, the staff, and even Mr. Lecter himself. It prickled his senses, warning him off with goosebumps and shivers. But there was something he might uncover, if he decided to stay. Something that might drag him down and never toss him back.

Will brought the tip of the pen down and signed his name.

“Thank you, Mr. Graham,” said Mr. Lecter. His slender fingers reached out and collected the papers, then filed them away in one swift motion. “Abigail will show you to your room.”

As if on cue, the maid opened the door.

“Thank you, sir,” he replied. Will stood and moved to greet Abigail in the doorway. He was almost across the threshold when he felt a slight resistance at the back of his collar, and the sound of scissors cutting through fabric.

He jumped, nearly colliding with Mr. Lecter as he spun around.

“I could see this was bothering you,” his employer said, extending the itchy tag to Will as an offering.

“Oh,” said Will, taking the tag and quickly stuffing it in his pocket. “Thank you.”

“Please stop by tomorrow morning for your first assignment,” said Mr. Lecter. He gave Will a parting look, dark eyes flitting across the mechanic’s face.

“This way, sir,” said Abigail, escorting him into the hall.

Will allowed her to guide him away as the door to Mr. Lecter’s study closed, and the spell broke. The rest of the house felt suddenly incomplete without the man’s presence. A fact that Will had trouble explaining, given he knew next to nothing about his current employer.

His hand reached up, almost unthinkingly, and traced the smooth line where Mr. Lecter had cut the tag from his jacket. Will hadn’t even heard the man stand, much less come within a foot of his head.

Abigail stopped, turning to him with a cautious look. “Are you coming, sir?”

“Yes,” he said, quickly retracting his hand.

Will had given his word, and there was no going back.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Happy labor day weekend :)

Abigail steered them towards the domed entryway, and soon they were back at the door. The butler remained at his post, rapt eyes trained on their approach.

“Is he keeping this one?” the man asked.

The maid stared at him for a moment, as if toying with an idea, then said, “Mr. Lecter has taken a liking to him.”

The butler carefully folded his hands behind his back and turned to Will. His face was contorted with a forced cheeriness as he replied, “No problem with that. I’m sure you’ll find your stay enjoyable, Mr. Graham.”

“Just Will, if that’s alright.”

The man tipped his head in agreement, then turned and left.

“Have I done something to upset him?” asked Will.

Abigail glanced up, her lips bending into a smile as she said, “No, I’m the one who’s upset him. But don’t worry about it, Will. You don’t have anything to fear from Franklyn.”

Will wasn’t afraid of the butler, but he wouldn’t put it past the man to sabotage his first week at the manor. Franklyn clearly held Mr. Lecter in high regard, and it naturally followed that he disliked anyone who might rank above him in Lecter’s book. He felt quite sure that Franklyn would make an attempt, or perhaps several attempts, to rid him from the house before the end of the summer.

Abigail began to ascend the ornate staircase to the second floor, forcing Will out of his thoughts. The floorboards creaked as they went up, groaning under their weight. When they reached the top, he studied the lonely rooms.

“This one is mine,” Abigail informed him, pointing to the door closest to the stairs. Small flowers decorated the entryway to her room, but he could tell they had been painted years ago. The petals were chipping at the edges, bright red hues fading and cracking with age, turning rustic. Had the girl been living at the manor her whole life?

“That one is yours,” she continued, pointing to a room two doors down. It was unassuming. A pale white door in a hallway full of identical rooms, save for Abigail’s. He noticed a

broken bulb on the ceiling above her door, its glass shell having been cracked and never repaired.

“I’ll leave you to get settled in,” said Abigail, giving him a small bow before turning and descending the staircase.

Will crossed the hallway and opened the door to his room, taking in the new living arrangements. The furniture was sparse - just a bed, a desk, and a closet - but more than enough considering he would be spending most of his time around the manor, or roaming the grounds. A small window allowed him a view of the road.

Mr. Lecter owned several acres of property surrounding the house, including a dense thicket of trees and a lake beyond the woods. Will hadn’t been fishing in over a year. Admittedly, his last attempt hardly deserved to be called “fishing.” There were only two bodies of water close to the village. One of them was Mr. Lecter’s privately owned lake, rumored to be quite beautiful, and the other…

Will’s nose scrunched up, remembering the smell of *The Outhouse*. The lake by the village had earned its name for a good reason. It was unswimmable, and unspeakably dirty. Years of pollution had turned its crystal waters into muddied slop, housing more trash than fish.

Will plopped down on the bed and flung his shoes onto the floor. Mr. Lecter would have his first assignment tomorrow, and he needed to keep a clear head.

He closed his eyes and let Frederick and Abigail’s faces dance behind his eyelids, their figures blurring and meshing together as sleep crept in. Mr. Lecter’s face remained absent from the visions, but Will somehow felt his presence all the same. It was almost enough to rouse him from sleep, just to check that his employer was not *really* in the room -

But no, the thought was absurd.

He eventually calmed down, welcoming the darkness stealing over his senses. For now his body needed to be free of the manor and its strange occupants.

Will awoke with a start, shivering as he wrapped sweaty arms around his torso. There had been a creature in his dreams unlike anything he’d seen before. It bore a charcoal face, adorned with long protruding antlers on either side of its head. In the dream, Will had been roaming around the manor - walking down endless hallways, passing by door after door, when suddenly the thing appeared. It watched him, face completely expressionless, yet somehow Will knew it was curious to see what he’d do next.

He rubbed some warmth back into his arms and attempted to banish the thought. The sun had just begun to rise, and he kept his focus trained on the view as his heart rate evened out. Mr. Lecter would have a job for him today, and there was no use dwelling on bad dreams.

Pulling himself together, Will got off the bed and quickly dressed, attempting to look decent. Once set, he opened the door and stepped into the hall, bumping into Abigail.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“I could say the same.”

“I’m supposed to be up early,” Abigail reminded him. “To get everything ready for Mr. Lecter.”

“Mr. Lecter never said when he wanted to meet with me today,” said Will. “I get the sense it’s better to be safe than sorry with him.”

The girl laughed - her first, genuine laugh since Will had arrived. She offered him a warm look, then said, “I think you’ll work out just fine, Will.”

“Don’t jinx me,” he teased. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You’ve done more than you think,” she replied. “Mr. Lecter doesn’t hire just anyone on the spot.”

“I’m not sure if I should be comforted by that,” said Will.

“Maybe not, but it says something all the same,” she said, motioning for him to follow her down the stairs. They began the descent, no doubt waking up anyone still asleep. If Mr. Lecter had the budget, the creaky steps certainly needed work.

When they reached the first floor, Abigail gave him a small courtesy, then said, “I have to go now, but we should talk again this evening.”

“I would like that,” said Will, casting the girl a final glance before she turned the corner and disappeared.

Abigail seemed truthful to an extent. She wouldn’t lie to him, but she wouldn’t tell him everything either. No doubt years at the manor had endeared her to Lecter, and her loyalties were with him.

Will stood in the domed entryway for a long minute, fidgeting with his jacket and attempting to determine the best course of action. There was no telling when Mr. Lecter would be in his study, leaving him with nothing to do and far too much time to ponder the stag-like creature from his dreams. There were certainly things that could be done around the house - like fixing the broken bulb he’d spotted above Abigail’s room, or even taking a crack at the stairs - but he couldn’t be sure his new employer would find it appropriate for Will to begin tinkering around the house without his permission.

As if answering some unspoken prayer, the man himself suddenly appeared, popping out from a door Will hadn’t noticed yesterday.

“Will,” he greeted, offering a friendly smile.

“Mr. Lecter,” he replied, bowing his head slightly.

“Please, come in for some tea,” his employer offered, leading him towards the study where they had spoken yesterday.

Will didn’t get a chance to reply before they were walking down the hall together, and settling themselves into chairs in Mr. Lecter’s office.

“Is the room to your liking?” asked Mr. Lecter. He pushed a teacup across the table for Will to take. It smelled earthly and sweet, as if the man had gone and plucked the tea leaves fresh from his own garden.

Will wrapped his fingers around the cup, letting the warm porcelain distract him from Lecter’s eyes, which seemed to inevitably drown him each time they looked at one another.

“It’s very nice,” said Will. “Thank you for the room, and for the tea.”

“You are always welcome here for tea,” said Mr. Lecter. “If you should find yourself free in the mornings.”

“I have no other appointments,” Will joked.

Lecter smiled, and Will was forced to bear the delighted look in his eyes as they both drank their tea and danced around each other, uncertain of where the boundaries lie.

“You mentioned having an assignment for me,” said Will.

“Yes, there’s a small issue that should be dealt with,” Mr. Lecter replied, folding his hands together and composing himself in the manner of a typical employer. “The kitchen sink appears to have a leak. If you open up the cabinet, you’ll find the bottom of it still damp. I was hoping you could diagnose the issue.”

Will nodded, already setting his mind to the task. “Sure, we’ll start off with a flow test to determine where the leak is coming from. If it’s small I can probably set it right with some silicone tape or epoxy putty.”

“I’ll leave it in your care,” said Lecter. “After that is done, please see me for your next assignment.”

He finished his tea and hastily stood, offering his employer a muted thanks before turning and exiting the room. The man was perfectly normal, but Will’s skin tingled each time he entered his employer’s space, as if sensing something he did not.

For now he was preoccupied with the leaky pipe under the sink, and whether or not it would require him to head into town for additional supplies. No doubt this would be the first of many small repairs that needed attending to around the manor.

Will only hoped the work would keep him safely distracted from the shadows that had begun to creep into his dreams.

Chapter 3

Will crouched down and shined his flashlight on the pipes beneath the kitchen sink. The water was on, and his eyes were trained on the source of the drip - a small crack less than half an inch in length.

There were many reasons the crack could have formed, though Will had his suspicions. With the start of summer, the weather was rapidly changing from blistering cold to simmering heat, causing the drain pipes to contract and expand. The wall of the pipe likely thinned, leading it to crack.

Will turned off the water and began to root around his toolkit, looking for the epoxy putty. He pulled it out and unscrewed the lid, taking a generous amount and kneading it between his hands. He then turned and molded the putty around the fissure, securing it to the pipe. It was a temporary solution, but one that would solve the immediate problem of Mr. Lecter's soggy cabinet.

Once set, he turned the water back on. He watched carefully and was satisfied when the casing held, stopping the drip.

"So you're Mr. Graham," a voice piped up, causing Will to flinch and bang his head against the top of the cabinet.

He ducked out of the pipework and turned to find someone watching him with a lax smile. The man had a full beard, dark brown hair, and a black Derby hat. He didn't look the part of house staff, but Will had no idea who else would be roaming the house, or asking him questions in the kitchen.

"I am," said Will, getting to his feet. "I don't think we've met."

"Frederick," the man offered, extending a hand. "Mr. Lecter's tailor."

"Ah," said Will, pointedly ignoring Frederick's hand.

"Not one for pleasantries, are you, Graham?" the man said, suddenly looking rather interested.

"I don't mean to be impolite," said Will. Perhaps he did, but it wasn't acceptable to admit as much. "It's good to meet you, but I should be getting on."

"Of course," said Frederick. "I'm sure Lecter keeps you busy around this house. It's older than the dirt it sits on."

"I don't mind the work," said Will, packing up his toolkit and offering the man a polite smile. "I'm sure I'll see you around."

"I would count on it," Frederick replied, tipping his hat and leaving the room.

Will sighed. He didn't like Frederick, and it wasn't just because the tailor had caused a sizable bruise on the back of his head. The man had a clinical fascination in his eyes that Will had seen too many times.

Before moving to Wolf Trap and establishing himself as a mechanic, Will had been a detective working out of Baltimore. His former boss, Jack Crawford, was the chief of the Baltimore Police Department, and an acclaimed figure in the law enforcement community. Will's days on the force had been brief, but in less than a year he'd seen as many dead bodies as a practiced mortician. Crawford had used him as a tool for tracking down Baltimore's coldest cases, weaponizing his empathy to hunt psychopaths.

For all his experience, Crawford failed to see the danger in letting Will slip into the minds of killers. It led to evidence, and the evidence led to convictions. Putting offenders behind bars counted for more than the weeks of nightmares, the tremors, the monstrous feelings lingering just beneath his skin -

Will tightened his grip on the toolkit. Frederick was no Jack Crawford, and he was a long way from Baltimore. The tailor might be curious, but the man had no leverage in the house, and Will wasn't against putting Mr. Lecter's favoritism to good use.

He left the kitchen in a hurry, letting his feet carry him to the front door. He hesitated for a moment before turning the knob and stepping outside.

The sun warmed his skin as he stood on the porch, welcoming him back into the world. He watched the gardeners tending to Mr. Lecter's property, trimming the bushes, mowing the lawn, and seeing to the many assorted flowers. Will left his toolkit on the porch and walked down the steps.

A set of drooping orange flowers had caught his attention. The entire plant was growing upside-down, as if a magnetic force had a grip on the flowers, pulling them away from the sun and towards the ground below.

"I see you have found my Angel's Trumpet."

Will jumped, letting out a startled breath as he registered Mr. Lecter standing beside him.

"I'm not familiar with the plant," he admitted.

"It's not found in many gardens," said Mr. Lecter. "People are wary of its effects."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing at all," Lecter replied, turning to look at him. "Only that you shouldn't eat one."

Will nodded. They stood in amiable silence for a moment before Will added, "I fixed the sink."

"Did it cause you much trouble?"

“No, it was a small leak,” he dismissed. He tried very hard not to think of Frederick, but the tailor popped into his head anyways.

“Is there something else on your mind, Will?”

Will lifted his eyes to meet Lecter’s. As always, there was something unnameable about his expression. His employer seemed perfectly at ease, but Will could feel something dark crawling out from behind the facade.

He wanted to believe that his brain was wrong, and too much time on the force had turned him paranoid. Yet he couldn’t deny there was a part of him - a small part - that hoped his suspicions were true. He had buried the thrill of the hunt in a shallow grave, and it wouldn’t take much to be resurrected.

“Is it obvious?” he asked, mostly to distract himself.

“If there’s something amiss in the house, it’s your prerogative to inform me, Will.”

“It’s nothing with the house,” he said. “Really, it’s nothing at all.”

Mr. Lecter hummed, not quite believing him, then said, “Do let me know if anything comes to mind.”

“Alright,” said Will, absentmindedly tugging at his sleeves. He wouldn’t rat out Frederick just yet. The man hadn’t actually done anything, and there was no use stirring up bad blood on his first day. “What do you need me to fix next?”

Mr. Lecter considered the question for a minute, then said, “The toilet on the first floor appears to be running longer than necessary. It’s been driving up the water bill. Perhaps you could take a look?”

“I’ll get it sorted.”

“Good,” Lecter agreed. “But after lunch.”

“Is there a servant’s dining hall?” asked Will. “I should have asked Abigail this morning.”

“We all dine together,” said Mr. Lecter. He seemed to perk up at the change of subject, though Will shouldn’t have been surprised. Food was his specialty. “Except when the manor is hosting guests, of course.”

“Your famous dinner parties,” Will remarked. “People would kill to get an invitation.”

“Would they?” he asked, clearly amused. “And how about you?”

“You wouldn’t want me there.”

“I disagree.”

They stared each other down, neither relenting until a gardener suddenly happened upon them, dropping his pruning shears in surprise.

“Oh! Apologies, sir. I didn’t see you, Mr. Lecter,” the man said, giving their employer a courteous bow. He then turned to Will. “Mr. Graham, sir.”

“Just Will.” He was the first to look away, breaking off their unspoken contest. Will almost laughed at the look on the gardener’s face. No doubt rumors of his conversation with Mr. Lecter would be whispered around the house later tonight.

“Will, sir,” the man hastily amended. “I’ll take my leave.” The gardener picked up his shears and quickly escaped to the opposite side of the property.

Mr. Lecter returned his gaze to Will, trapping his attention once again. “I insist you join me for our next dinner party.”

“It wouldn’t be appropriate,” said Will. “I’m not a guest.”

“You are my guest,” said Mr. Lecter.

Will shook his head, but finally said, “If you’re sure.”

“Consider it settled,” he replied, with an approving look.

His employer smiled, a real and genuine smile that warmed something deep in Will’s stomach. He realized, with no small amount of terror, that he’d begun to care whether Mr. Lecter liked him.

Chapter 4

Lunch was an extravagant affair. What should have been a casual meal was arranged like a royal feast, boasting a wide assortment of sliced meats, fresh bread, cheese wedges, and choose-your-own condiments. His eye was naturally drawn to the center of the table, where someone had folded salami into a bouquet of roses. It looked too beautiful to eat.

Everyone in the house converged upon the dining room like bees swarming a hive, and he was relieved to find Abigail among their midst.

“Good day?” she asked. Her white apron was dusted with brown flecks, and she smelled of spice and warmth.

“So far,” he replied. “Have you been cooking?”

“Cinnamon cake,” she said, shaking out her apron. “You should grab a plate. It always runs out fast.”

Will followed her to the table and forked out a small portion of each meat, stacking them together haphazardly on his sandwich. Abigail’s cake was still warm to the touch as he cut off a piece and set it on his plate.

“It looks delicious,” he complimented.

“It’s a simple recipe,” she replied. He noticed that Abigail had skipped the meat altogether, and took only a few cubes of cheddar cheese, paired with a brioche bread.

“Are you vegetarian?”

Her head snapped up, as if he’d revealed something disastrous. “What?”

“You didn’t grab any meat,” said Will, confused by her reaction.

“Abigail,” a familiar voice cut in. Mr. Lecter joined them, his eyes darting to the maid with a knowing look. “Will is quite right. You need something more nutritious on your plate.”

She swallowed and quickly nodded. Will didn’t have time to process the look on her face before she disappeared to follow Mr. Lecter’s order.

“How do you like it, Will?”

“I haven’t tried any yet,” he admitted, shooting his sandwich a probing look. Surely the food wasn’t poisoned. Mr. Lecter would have no discernable reason for killing his entire staff, and Will seriously doubted his employer would do anything that might spoil the taste or presentation.

“Easily remedied,” he said, not waiting for Will’s reply before maneuvering them towards a long, oak table. Will, at his employer’s request, sat beside him at the head of the table.

They had barely sat down before Mr. Lecter was motioning for someone to join them. Will turned to see Abigail making her way through the crowd, her plate now piled high with roast beef, and a salami rose nested within the dejected cubes of cheese.

Upon reaching the table, she set down her plate and took the seat opposite Will.

Mr. Lecter addressed her, asking, “How was your day in the kitchen, Abigail?”

“It was alright,” she said. Abigail picked up the rose and carefully pulled apart the folds of meat, slowly consuming each piece.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replied, looking satisfied. Mr. Lecter speared a piece of Abigail’s cinnamon cake, savoring it for a moment before offering, “You are coming along quite well.”

Abigail looked up, searching for something in Mr. Lecter’s expression. She seemed to find it, for the next moment her shoulders relaxed, and she returned to her usual self.

Will watched the exchange in utter confusion, feeling even more wary about his sandwich.

“Are you not hungry, Will?” Mr. Lecter had his gaze fixed on the mechanic’s untouched plate.

“I probably shouldn’t eat too much.” His leg bounced beneath the table like a wild jack rabbit caught in a snare. “I get sick easily.”

“Do you?”

Will swallowed, doubling down on the lie. “Yes.”

He nearly jumped when long fingers brushed against his knee, silencing his leg immediately. A red blush spread across his cheeks, but Will said nothing. Mr. Lecter didn’t pull away.

“I could have a little, though.”

“Good,” his employer replied.

Will picked up a slice of ham and brought it to his lips. His eyes roved over the rough, pink texture in a last ditch attempt at deducing the issue, but when the grip on his knee tightened, he was forced to eat.

It shouldn’t have tasted so good.

“How is it, Will?”

“Delicious,” he admitted.

Mr. Lecter retracted his hand, assured that Will would finish his meal.

“Is this what your dinner parties are like?” he asked, desperate to put out the simmering heat crawling up his neck.

“Those engagements require more care and attention,” replied his employer, his eyes trained on Will with a captivated glimmer.

Abigail’s gaze flitted between the two of them, looking as if she wanted to flee the scene.

They were all saved by the arrival of a maid, who took the chair to Will’s right. She had long, dark hair that was pulled back in a high ponytail, and a relaxed, self-assured disposition that instantly put Will at ease. At least there was one normal person in the house.

“Beverly,” Mr. Lecter greeted.

“Mr. Lecter,” she replied. Beverly nodded at Abigail, then turned to Will. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“We haven’t,” he said, offering her a half-hearted smile. “I’m the new mechanic.”

“Thank God for that,” she said, biting into her sandwich. She swallowed a chunk of roast beef, then asked, “Could you take a look at my room? I’ve got a window that doesn’t shut right.”

“I’m sure I can fit you in,” he said. “Are you on the second floor?”

“Beverly’s room is next to yours,” Abigail informed him.

“Makes things easy,” he replied. “I’ll drop by after I fix the toilet.”

Will forced himself to eat everything on his plate, wary of provoking Mr. Lecter a second time. Excitement and terror blurred together, rushing through his system with the same frenzied energy. A single touch had short-circuited every neural pathway in his brain.

Chapter 5

Will escaped to the first floor bathroom at his earliest chance. He busied himself with work, trying to keep his mind away from the turbulent lunch, and the many questions that now hung in the air. He really couldn't decide which was more pressing - Mr. Lecter's advances or Abigail's secret. Both were becoming a problem, and neither had easy answers.

Beverly, at least, seemed nice enough. He desperately needed the support of someone outside of Mr. Lecter's pocket. A friend would be nice too.

Will flushed the toilet and lifted the lid. The water slowly began to rise, refilling the tank. He watched it climb higher and higher, until suddenly the water was everywhere.

He looked around in confusion, startled to find himself in the middle of a river. A wild current was raging, attempting to pull him downstream. Will barely registered the cold seeping into his shoes. He was waist deep and soaked to the bone.

A bright light suddenly blinded him, turning everything white. Static rung in his ears, accompanying flashing sensations and black spots. For a moment he considered the very real possibility that he might be dying.

When it finally ended, Will found himself back in Mr. Lecter's first floor bathroom, perfectly dry and unscathed.

"Oh my god," he whispered, rubbing tired hands over his face.

It must be poison. But had Mr. Lecter poisoned only him? No, he must be doing the same to Abigail - she knew to avoid the meat. What purpose this served to his employer was a mystery. Perhaps he just enjoyed watching them all go mad.

His thoughts dragged on, spiraling. Will forced himself to look inside the tank as a distraction. Water continued to pour into the already full tank, well past the point where the shut-off should have been initiated. It spilled into the overflow drain, along with all of Mr. Lecter's money. He quickly deduced the fill valve wasn't adjusted correctly.

The thought almost made him laugh. Mr. Lecter was poisoning him, and Will's only form of retaliation was refusing to fix the man's toilet. He was almost stupid and petty enough to do it.

With great reluctance, Will adjusted the valve and fixed the overflow issue, testing the toilet a second time to ensure it filled only to the limit and not beyond.

He lingered in the bathroom afterwards, at a loss for what to do next. He needed to be outside. Not by the lake - not yet, anyways. The river still clung to his ankles, turning his skin icy cold. Not the gardens either - that place was charged with memories now, and he wanted to avoid those. The woods, maybe, or even somewhere off the property entirely. He wanted to disappear for a bit.

Will stole a quick breath and bolted into the hall. To his great relief, no one was around. His feet darted across the floor, searching for the door. He came upon the entryway and wasted no time in pushing past the final barrier.

Fresh air and sunlight greeted him like old friends. Will stood on the porch, listening to the rapid *thump thump* of his heart and willing to panic to go away.

It was stupid, really. Panic wouldn't serve him. It would only expose him, and allow the monsters to track his scent. He knew all these things. But something about the manor was different in a way that was so subtly malicious he couldn't even put a name to the monster.

Will didn't think as he stepped off the porch and began walking down the road. Perhaps he would end up in town, or perhaps he would get lost.

"Hey!"

He tensed as someone began to approach, their footsteps crunching in the gravel. Will peered over his shoulder, relieved to find that it was only Beverly.

"Hey," he greeted. "What's wrong?"

"Uh, did you forget something?" she asked, looking at him expectantly. Beverly may have been a maid, but she had the commanding presence of a general.

"Oh," said Will, suddenly remembering their earlier conversation. "Your window?"

"You were supposed to stop by," said Beverly. "I hold a man to his promises, Will."

"No, you're right," he agreed, unconsciously running a hand up and down his arm to bring back some warmth. The sun was doing little to quell the goosebumps crawling up his skin. "Sorry, lost track of time. I only just got done with the toilet, and wanted some time outside before the sun went down."

"Oh, well don't apologize for that," she said. Beverly watched him, seeming to pick up on his jitteriness. She strode forwards and looped her arm through his, joining him on his aimless walk. "Where are we headed?"

"Nowhere, or maybe town."

"I vote for town," she replied. "Otherwise we won't be back in time for dinner."

The thought of dinner made his stomach turn, and it must have shown on his face.

"You don't like Mr. Lecter's food?"

"It's not that," he said.

"I should hope not," said Beverly. "Getting a bad review might actually kill him. Especially if it's coming from you."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Will.

“Don’t be oblivious,” she said. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Alright so he’s got some kind of… *interest*... in me,” he admitted, waving his hands around in unintelligible gestures. “So what? It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means something to him,” she said. Beverly eyed him with a knowing look that he didn’t like at all. Was this whole thing obvious to everyone else?

“I don’t want to talk about Mr. Lecter,” Will dismissed. “Any other topic.”

“Fine, but you asked for it,” Beverly replied. “Let’s start with this month’s fashion catalog from *Modern Women* .”

Chapter 6

Although it was still the middle of summer, Will learned that magazines were already dropping their fall predictions. Editors were scrambling to guess which colors and fabrics their customers would drop exorbitant amounts of money on, all in an effort to ride the wave of the latest trends. It seemed rather absurd to Will, who owned no more than five shirts at any given time.

“I’d like to get my hands on a pair of Cherry Moore riding boots,” said Beverly, tuning him back into the conversation. “The red ones are so expensive, though.”

“How much?”

“A hundred and fifty for the pair,” she said glumly, kicking a stray rock out of their path. “Who has money like that?”

“Rich people,” quipped Will.

“Well I don’t expect to come into an inheritance anytime soon,” she replied.

Will offered her a sympathetic smile. In another lifetime he imagined Beverly having as many pairs of Cherry Moore riding boots as she pleased - all in varying colors, but the reds being her favorite. She would take them out on horseback, riding across the countryside. The cherished things would be caked in mud and grime from the journey. Enough to shock the editors of the posh magazine that sold them to her.

“What’s got you smiling?”

“Nothing,” he dismissed. “Is there another pair you like?”

“Well the Veronica Rose collection is always tempting,” she offered. “But really they wouldn’t even serve a purpose. I just like looking at them.”

“They would serve an aesthetic purpose,” said Will. “That’s as good a reason as any.”

“It would be a stupid move,” she dismissed, though he didn’t miss the way her lips quirked up, happy at the show of support. “It’s funny, I’ve only ever bothered Abigail about this stuff. You’re not so bad of a talker, Graham.”

“I wouldn’t say conversation is my strong suit,” he replied.

“Your brain is your strong suit,” said Beverly. “Doesn’t matter who you’re with, it adapts to fit the situation.”

“I guess,” he said. “But maybe that’s not always a good thing.”

Beverly frowned, then said, “What do you mean?”

“What if the person I’m with isn’t someone who I should… *adapt* for?”

“I get the feeling we’re talking about a particular someone,” she mused. “Though you expressly forbid me from saying his name.”

“We’ve gotten off track,” said Will, abruptly changing the subject. “Tell me more about Abigail.”

“What do you want to know?” replied Beverly. Her eyes shined with barely concealed amusement, but she allowed him to dodge the weighty feelings associated with their mutual employer.

“How long has she been at the manor?” he asked.

“Abigail’s mother used to work here,” Beverly informed him. “But she died in a freak accident. Mr. Lecter took Abigail in when she was about five or six. She’s practically his daughter.”

“But she works on the staff,” said Will.

“He only put her there to keep an eye on us,” dismissed Beverly. “But she's free to do as she likes. It’s the manor’s worst kept secret.”

“Does she report back to him?”

“I’d assume so,” she replied, as if that was a perfectly normal thing to expect. “Obviously don’t say anything to Abigail that you wouldn’t want Mr. Lecter to know. She’s his eyes and ears around the house.”

“Right,” he said. “And what about the others? Franklyn? Frederick?”

“Franklyn is a mouse of a man,” laughed Beverly. “Honestly I’m surprised Mr. Lecter kept him on as a butler. Frederick is more of a weasel.” She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then added, “But there’s someone else you haven’t met.”

Will turned, giving her a rare moment of direct eye contact. “Who?”

“Antony,” she supplied. “He’s one of Mr. Lecter’s footmen, and an old flame if you believe the rumors.”

His feet stopped in the middle of the road, unbidden. “He slept with one of his own footmen?”

“If you believe Antony,” she said. Her eyes roamed his face, as if testing the waters of their budding friendship. “It might not be true.”

“Well it doesn’t concern me,” he dismissed. Will hated the pang that rang through his body. It was a feeling far too akin to jealousy, and it burned with the same bitter taste.

It was a relief to both of them when they finally reached town. Wolf Trap was a small but bustling place, filled with locals whose families had been born and raised on the same patch of land for generations. The shops were quaint, each one unique, though Will preferred to seclude himself in the hardware store and make small talk with the owner's son, Matthew. He had always treated Will like a friend, when others had relegated him an outsider.

"I need to get some supplies," he told Beverly. "Do you want to come, or should I meet you somewhere else?"

"Let's regroup at the bell tower in two hours," she replied. "I'm going to stop in Maselliene's."

"Alright," he agreed, offering her a parting look as they went their separate ways.

Somehow even the air felt cleaner in town, as if a fog had suddenly been lifted. He'd spent less than a week at the Chesapeake Manor, but its tendrils had already wrapped around him and buried their way into his lungs.

As he came upon the hardware store, Will felt a palpable relief. This was a place where he could return to himself, if just for the afternoon. No strange meals or dangerous secrets, just rows of tools and good company.

The bell rang as he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Chapter 7

“Graham!” a voice rang out. Will turned to see Matthew getting up, dropping a newspaper haphazardly on the floor as moved to greet the mechanic. He had a playful look about him that was almost too erratic. It intrigued Will, and should have concerned him, but compared to the staff at the manor Matthew was the picture of sanity. “Didn’t think I’d see you back here.”

“I’m not being held captive,” Will replied dryly.

“We both know the manor staff don’t hang around town,” Matthew replied. He leaned back against the check-out counter, then asked, “You jail break?”

“I took a walk,” said Will, starting to meander the isles, looking for nothing in particular.

“Yeah?” said Matthew, trailing behind him. “Well tell me what’s been going on.”

“There’s not much to tell,” he said. “I haven’t been there that long.”

“Oh come on,” said Matthew, moving in front of Will and blocking his way. “You get a fancy job at the manor and now I’m too good for you? I can tell when you’re holding out.”

“I don’t feel like talking about the manor,” said Will, leaning down to inspect a folding utility knife on the bottom rack. “Tell me about what’s been happening here.”

“Nothing,” said Matthew shortly. “Nothing, Will. You know that. Come on, there must be something you can tell me.”

Will grabbed the knife and stood, then said, “Mr. Lecter had a broken toilet. I fixed it.”

“That’s it?”

Will shrugged. “You wanted to know something. That’s what I did this afternoon.”

“You’re impossible, Graham,” said Matthew. “Maybe we can have a trade, huh? I see you like that one.” He eyed the blade in Will’s hands.

“I can pay for it myself,” said Will.

“Not if I rack up the price,” the other man replied, his eyes glinting. “That’s now two hundred dollars.”

Will shot him a dirty look. “You’re being ridiculous. Where’s your dad?”

“Out,” said Matthew smugly. “If you want it you can either pay up or give me a secret from the Chesapeake.”

“And what if I don’t have any secrets?”

“Then I guess you’re out of luck.”

Will considered it for a moment, folding and unfolding the knife, feeling the press of metal against his fingertips.

“Alright, I have one.”

“I knew you did,” said Matthew, satisfied with himself. “What is it, then?”

“There’s a girl who lives at the manor,” said Will. “Abigail. Her mother died in an accident when she was little.”

“Abigail Hobbs?” he asked, his eyes flashing with curiosity. “My dad knew her family.”

“Well Mr. Lecter took her in,” the mechanic continued. “She’s a teenager now.”

“So?” he prompted.

“I don’t think it was an accident that killed her mother.”

Matthew’s ears perked up. “Someone murdered her?”

Will shrugged, but said, “I find it odd, that’s all.”

“Don’t be slick,” said Matthew. “You want me to go around town chasing leads.”

“What you do with the information is up to you,” said Will with a knowing smile. “But since there’s nothing going on here…” he trailed off.

“Free knife and a private eye,” replied Matthew, shaking his head. “Guess I got the short end of the stick.”

Will pocketed the blade. “I’ll try to make it back here in a few weeks. We’ll talk then.”

“Yeah, alright,” Matthew shrugged. They exchanged a brief goodbye, and the bell dinged again as Will stepped back onto the busy streets.

He began the journey to the bell tower, fully intending to wait by the benches until Beverly was done with her shopping. Fate had other plans.

“Are you in the habit of running off, Will?”

He nearly jumped out of his skin. Actually, he did jump out of his skin. Mr. Lecter had all but materialized out of thin air. Will registered the cold press of metal in his hand, and realized with muted horror that he’d drawn the utility knife. The tip of it pressed against Mr. Lecter’s expensive navy suit, just above his abdomen. Poised to strike.

“Shit,” he swore, quickly pocketing the knife and running shaky hands through his hair. “Sorry, no that wasn’t - I didn’t -”

“It’s quite alright,” said Mr. Lecter, holding up an assuring hand. “I startled you.”

“Yeah, I - uh - “ he said, looking around, desperately wishing Beverly would also suddenly appear. “I didn’t think you’d be in town.”

“I had an errand,” his employer supplied. He seemed perfectly content to watch Will sweat. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

“Right, yeah,” said Will. “Well, um, I was just going to meet Beverly - ”

“Do you frequent the hardware store often?” asked Mr. Lecter, his gaze lazily drifting between the shop and Will, his eyes catching on the silhouette of Matthew Brown.

“No,” he said immediately. *Blatant lie and he knows it.* “Sometimes. There’s only one supply shop in town.”

“I see,” said Mr. Lecter, his words measured and calm. “Perhaps it would be suitable to have Franklyn make these trips. He is terribly in need of something to do, and there is no need to inconvenience you with the journey.”

Will took the suggestion for what it was - an order.

“Sure,” he said, attempting to keep the bitter edge out of his tone. “Good idea.”

“Excellent,” said Mr. Lecter. He looked down at his watch, checking the time, then offered Will a parting look. “I must be getting back. Please give Beverly my regards. I look forward to seeing you both at dinner.”

Dinner. As if one hallucination wasn’t enough. It was almost impossible to stick the allegations in his head to the poised, respectable figure in front of him.

As Mr. Lecter walked back to the manor, Will began to question whether his words to Matthew earlier were actually true. Perhaps he was being held captive after all.

Chapter 8

By the time Beverly made it to the belltower Will was in a viciously bad mood. The thought of his freedoms being subject to Mr. Lecter's whims was enough to send him over the edge, and his conflicting feelings about the man did nothing to help.

"Wow, you look sour," Beverly commented.

"Yeah, ran into a mutual acquaintance," he replied, rubbing at his temples. He could feel a headache coming on, like a tight band wrapped around his skull.

"No way," she said. "Mr. Lecter was here?"

"Walking amongst us," quipped Will. "I almost stabbed him by accident. Obviously I didn't me-"

"I'm sorry," Beverly interrupted, holding up a hand. "Repeat that."

Will laughed, realizing how absurd it sounded. "I *almost* stabbed him, but in my defense he came out of nowhere."

"Let me get this straight," she said. "Our employer bumped into you on the street and your first instinct was to pull a knife on him?"

"It doesn't sound great when you put it like that."

"You should get yourself a therapist, Graham," she said, shaking her head. To his surprise, Beverly didn't look shocked by his actions.

She must be numb to strange occurrences after so many years at the manor. Though he seriously doubted whether anyone else on the staff had ever held Mr. Lecter at knife point. That thought alone was almost enough to lift his spirits.

"Therapists are more trouble than they're worth," replied Will.

He took note of the bag dangling from Beverly's arm. The name *Maselliene* was scrawled in red across the side.

"Find anything good?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Two shirts and a pair of sandals," she replied. Beverly opened the bag and took the items out one by one, displaying them for Will to see. The first shirt was creamy white and professional looking. The second was baby blue, with tiny white dots speckled across the front. The sandals were unassuming, but looked sturdy enough.

"Each is for a different occasion," he said.

"Dinner parties, days off, and evenings by the lake," she informed.

“Staff doesn’t work the dinner parties?” asked Will.

“Mr. Lecter brings in outside help,” replied Beverly. “We usually hold a get together for just the servants while Mr. Lecter entertains his guests.”

“I’d much rather attend that,” he said moodily.

She raised an eyebrow. “You won’t be there?”

Will groaned. His head felt like it was sitting in a pot of boiling stew, and someone kept turning up the temperature.

“No, I’ve been invited to the main event.”

Beverly’s smile was all too much. “I’ll leave the matter alone for now. You look miserable enough.”

“I really don’t feel good,” he admitted, wiping away the sweat that had begun to drip down his neck, dampening his collar.

Her smile fell, amusement replaced with concern. “You look a little feverish.”

“Yeah, might be,” he mumbled, pushing himself off the bench. “Should probably get back. I think Mr. Lecter might hunt me down if I don't show up.”

Beverly took Will’s arm and slung it across her shoulder, helping prop him up. “Good thing I’m here, then. I doubt you’d want Mr. Lecter dragging you up the road.”

“I think I’ve had enough embarrassment for one day.”

The walk back was torture, but Beverly did her best to keep him distracted. He was now up-to-date on the latest gossip between Evelyn Weathers and Macy Williams, the daughters of two local families with a tumultuous history.

“Macy blames their whole family,” said Beverly. “If it wasn’t for Evelyn’s dad cutting back on safety regulations at the factory, her mom might still have an arm. It was a horrible thing, really. Mr. Lecter made it there just in time.”

Even in his deluded state, Mr. Lecter’s name rang through his skull.

“Mr. Lecter… saved her?”

“He’s medically trained,” she replied. “Obviously he doesn’t work as a doctor or anything, but if there’s ever a serious emergency he lends a hand.”

Will hummed, not sure what to make of Beverly’s insight. Mr. Lecter hardly seemed like the idle type. He didn’t fit the profile of a lazy estate manager, content to let his fortune take care of everything. No, the man would get bored. Terribly bored. Emergencies were a chance to flex an old muscle, indulge in a taste of the extreme.

He couldn't decide if he was relieved or not when the house came into view. He felt more like a prisoner than ever, but trudging all the way back to town was out of the question. They stumbled to the door, and Will was surprised when Franklyn appeared in the entryway, holding it open and offering the pair a friendly look.

"Will, Beverly," he greeted. "Out late? We're about to eat."

He studied Franklyn, unable to restrain his racing thoughts. The man was pleased about something. He wouldn't be friendly unless he was in a good mood, and a good mood would only come about if Mr. Lecter had given him something to chew on. *Ah,* Will remembered. The task of retrieving supplies from the hardware store. A punishment for Will, but no doubt a sign of trust and responsibility when bestowed upon Franklyn. The man thought it was a special thing, to be given an assignment from Mr. Lecter.

"Will isn't feeling well," said Beverly. "I don't think he'll be at dinner."

"Nonsense," said a smooth, familiar voice.

The mechanic turned to look at Mr. Lecter, but kept his eyes well away from the man's face. He felt like a bloated sponge, full of everyone else's thoughts and feelings.

"Are you alright, Will?"

His employer moved forward, as if to relieve Beverly of her position. The fear this sent down his spine was unexplainable, but entirely too real.

"No," he said, pulling back. Beverly moved with him as he stepped back, closer to the stairs.

Will looked up then, finally meeting his employer's gaze. The man regarded him as a chemist might regard a particularly volatile chemical. It was clinical and curious, as if anticipatory about what combination of heat and ice, pressure and flexibility, might cause a change in behavior.

"I'm not a lab rat," he said, before he could stop himself. He realized, quickly, that his words made no sense in the context of their conversation.

"Mr. Lecter, I really think he should get some rest," said Beverly. She stood firm, holding him with a reassuring grip.

His employer was looking at him again. This time something popped up in the back of his eyes, where the man thought no one was looking. Something akin to… satisfaction?

"On the contrary," he said, moving forward before the pair could escape up the stairs. He looped Will's arm through his own and pulled him away from Beverly's safe harbor. "Will needs proper nutrition to recover. It's quite essential for fighting off any illness."

Will's head bobbed, not quite caught up with the fact that Mr. Lecter was holding him. The mechanic found himself being led to the dining room, Beverly trailing behind with a palpable worry.

Did she see now? he wondered. Was she beginning to realize that Mr. Lecter's interest was not a simple matter of affection? The man wanted something from him, but what he wanted was being concealed, too ugly to rear its head.

Will found himself dreading the day it would all come to light.

Chapter 9

Will was making a list of everything he hated about Antony Dimmond.

At the top of the list was his brown hair, generously dusted with silver, that highlighted the playful, enticing look in his eyes whenever Mr. Lecter glanced his way. The second was his outfit, an expensive dress livery that consisted of a long, knee-length maroon coat, lined with black, and a white waistcoat underneath. He was by far the best dressed among the staff, which shouldn't have come as a surprise due to the nature of his job. It irritated Will all the same. The third was his personality. Perhaps that item was premature, as the mechanic had yet to hold a conversation with the man, though he was confident that not only would the man's personality make the list - it would skyrocket to the top within a matter of minutes.

Truly, he had thought Mr. Lecter was done harassing him for spending the afternoon in the village. But apparently the torment was only just beginning, as his employer insisted that Antony take the seat to Will's left.

"Will Graham," Antony said, the name rolling off his tongue like hot butter. "Heard so much about you. All rumors, of course, and those pesky whispers are dangerously unreliable."

He got the feeling this was supposed to make him laugh, but the fire raging in his head took every word that Antony said and tossed it into the flames.

Antony cleared his throat and tried again. "I've been told you can fix just about anything. Have you been stumped yet? This house is quite the challenge."

When the mechanic didn't reply, Mr. Lecter chose to reply for him. "Will has yet to meet a challenge he cannot overcome."

Will turned to face his employer, not bothering to hide his irritation. It came as a surprise when he felt Mr. Lecter reach under the table and grab ahold of his hand, rubbing his thumb across the back of Will's knuckles.

The mechanic swallowed. His eyes might have glazed over for a minute.. or several… he wasn't really sure. He suddenly felt warm all over, in a way that had nothing to do with the fever. Was the man trying to drive him insane?

The grip on his hand loosened, and he registered Mr. Lecter pulling away.

"I'm afraid I'm needed in the kitchen," his employer said, excusing himself. "Dinner will be served shortly."

Will stared down at his empty plate and listened to his stomach grumble. He didn't want to eat the man's food, but there was really no choice in the matter. Even starvation seemed a remote possibility. Mr. Lecter simply wouldn't allow him to refuse the meal.

To top things off, he could enjoy his hallucinogenic-laced meat with the worst company imaginable.

“I rather feel we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” said Antony, trying to catch his gaze. “Surely we can be friends, Will?”

Friends. He almost laughed, but this time the footman wasn’t trying to make a joke.

Will sighed. He wasn’t getting rid of Antony Dimmond, and the man refused to be ignored.

“Sure,” he supplied. “We can be friends.”

“Good,” the footman said, his face brightening as if they really had patched things up. “You know, I see Mr. Lecter is rather fond of you. A strange thing to happen so quickly. It might be prudent for us to get to know each other better, Will. Perhaps the three of us -”

What happened next was instinctual. A reaction that sparked somewhere in his brain and traveled down the length of his arm. His hand moved of its own accord, picking up a fork and stabbing it through the back of Antony’s hand.

“GAH!” the footman screamed, clutching his injury. Antony was forced to pull the fork out himself. Will watched, fascinated, as blood began to drip onto the floor. He had left three small wounds on Antony, one for each of the fork’s prongs. A prudent reminder that anything involving *the three of them* was strictly off the table.

The mechanic hadn’t considered, of course, that this event had also been witnessed by everyone at the table. Including Mr. Lecter, who stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, holding a silver platter of meat.

He looked up, almost shyly, uncertain of what his employer would do next. This was certainly a fire-able offense.

But Mr. Lecter didn’t seem offended in the slightest. In fact, it felt as though they were finally seeing each other clearly. He moved forward and set the dish down on the table, then said, “Would everyone please make their way to the sitting room? We will reconvene in just a moment.”

Will watched the servants file out, his eyes lingering on Beverly and Abigail. Beverly, despite being told of his previous attempt to stab Mr. Lecter that same afternoon, appeared rattled to see the act in person. Abigail was as unreadable as their employer, a skill she no doubt picked up from the man.

Franklyn had taken to peeking over his shoulder to catch glimpses of Will, as if afraid he might be the next target of the mechanic’s wrath. Frederick, who he didn’t even realize had been invited to dinner, was altogether composed throughout the whole ordeal. It would be easy to miss the way his hands shook, hidden within his pockets.

His attention was stolen, however, by none other than Mr. Lecter.

“Will.”

Just his name. Yet there was a longing behind the word that hinted at something tender. He should have been concerned that Mr. Lecter found something… beautiful in the display. But he really couldn't be bothered to care about Antony, and the footman's blood admittedly made for a rather captivating scene.

Mr. Lecter bridged the space between them, coming to strand between Will and Antony.

"Quite the accident," he said, gently picking up the footman's hand and inspecting Will's handiwork. His lips quirked upwards, fighting off a smile. "But easily mended. Antony, would you please see Abigail? She will dress your wounds."

Antony stared at the two of them, looking very much like he wanted to contest the use of the word *accident*. But the pain must have been too distracting, for he ultimately gave their employer a resigned nod and fled to the safety of the sitting room.

Mr. Lecter settled himself into the vacant seat, his eyes boring into Will's.

"Something happened?" he broached.

"Nothing happened."

"It seems that Antony upset you."

"He didn't -" Will took a sharp breath, struggling to find the words. He hated that Antony had gotten under his skin, and in return, he had gotten under Antony's. Literally.

"I'm not angry," said Mr. Lecter. His voice was melodic and utterly calm. A stark contrast to the bloodstains on the floor. "But you know that."

"Yes," he said bitterly. "I know that."

"Good," Mr. Lecter replied. "There is no reason to delay dinner, then."

"That's all you have to say?" asked Will.

"We have already established my feelings on the matter," his employer replied. "Was there something else you wanted to discuss?"

The mechanic felt his teeth grind together in frustration. Mr. Lecter was baiting him, trying to provoke a response. He wanted a confession.

"No," replied Will. He assumed a blank expression that nearly mimicked Mr. Lecter's own. "Nothing."

Chapter 10

Dinner was wildly uncomfortable. Mr. Lecter had done his best to reassure the staff of Antony's well-being, but Will's reputation had long since been raked through the mud. Nobody dared take the seat to his left. Though perhaps the bloodstains had something to do with it.

"Abigail," said Mr. Lecter, pulling her into conversation. "You were telling me yesterday about a kit you found in the spare bedroom. A desk that needed assembling?"

The maid slowly nodded. Her eyes were fixed somewhere in the distance, not fully present. He quickly noticed a bloody handprint staining the back of her arm. No doubt where Antony had grabbed her during triage. The sight of it made his stomach turn with shame.

He forced himself to look away, instead focusing his attention on the peculiar way Abigail had plated her food. Only a small portion of beef accompanied the vegetables and sides, but the girl had artfully spread it over everything in a thin top layer. At a glance, meat would appear to be the main course, rather than the sizable amount of cauliflower and broccoli stuffed underneath. An almost indiscernible illusion, and one he planned on keeping to himself.

"Yes," she said, answering Mr. Lecter's question. "But it looked ancient. The screws inside the packaging were rusted."

"A small matter," their employer assured. "Franklyn can obtain replacement parts in town."

At the sound of his name, Franklyn's head shot up. "I can make a trip tomorrow!" he eagerly replied. The butler looked at Mr. Lecter as if he'd just been given a mission from God. It reminded Will of the way cult members worshiped their leaders. "I'll need a list, of course," he continued.

"Will?" asked Mr. Lecter, angling towards the mechanic. "I trust you can provide Franklyn with the details."

He met Franklyn's gaze, and the butler withered under the pressure. Will still had a bone to pick with Mr. Lecter for banning his visits to Wolf Trap. It certainly wasn't legal… but then again neither was assaulting someone with a fork, so his negotiating power was all but nonexistent.

"I'll take a look," he replied.

Will stared at his plate, wishing he'd been as smart as Abigail. Tender, delicious looking beef sat in front of him, smelling like garlic and onion, seasoned with freshly ground pepper. People would pay good money for something like this, and yet he'd give anything to toss it in the nearest dumpster. Perhaps he could sneak some into his pocket when Mr. Lecter wasn't looking…

As if reading his mind, Mr. Lecter turned to him with a pointed look. He sighed and picked up his fork, spearing a piece and resigning himself to another miserable night. At least it couldn't get any worse.

Frederick chose that moment to speak up.

The tailor cleared his throat, then said, "Mr. Lecter, when should we be expecting your next dinner party? Ms. Du Maurier has been inquiring."

"Bedelia," he said fondly. "Always a delight at the dinner table. Let us plan for something in the next two weeks. A welcoming party, of sorts," he mused. "Please schedule some time with Will for a fitting."

Frederick choked on his drink, sputtering as he set the glass down. "Ah… Will won't be attending the servant's gala?"

"He will be with me," Mr. Lecter replied, as if everything were that simple. "A navy suit would be best, don't you think?"

"Yes, of course," the tailor quickly replied. His eyes scanned Will, no doubt trying to get a read on his measurements from a distance rather than having to handle the fork-wielding psychopath up close. From the frustrated look on his face, it wasn't going very well.

Thinking about a dinner party only made Will's headache throb. Regular dinners were bad enough. Not to mention Antony might be there, along with the rest of Mr. Lecter's posh friends. He would stick out like a sore thumb… or more accurately, a bloody handprint.

"Beverly, perhaps you might like to join us?" Mr. Lecter asked. Will's head snapped up in surprise. He turned to his employer, struggling to determine if the proposal was an olive branch or a threat.

The maid looked up from her meal, equally unsure what to make of the offer. "At your next dinner party?" she clarified.

"That's correct."

Beverly looked at Will, silently asking whether he knew the right answer. He gave a slight shake of the head. Mr. Lecter's intentions were beyond him, and as much as he wanted to protect Beverly, he doubted either of them were getting out of the event.

"It would be an honor," she eventually replied, with a tentative smile. "Thank you for the invitation."

"It is my pleasure," said Mr. Lecter, raising his glass and toasting to the plans. Will grabbed his wine glass and knocked it back, letting the bitter taste drown out everything else. He wanted to get so drunk that not a single thought could pass through his head.

Dinner passed quickly as they all finished their meals and cleaned their plates. He was more than a little tipsy by the end, having refilled his glass twice during the short period of time. Beverly was throwing him warning looks that he chose to blatantly ignore.

His legs wobbled as he pushed back from the table and stood, but Mr. Lecter was there, as he always seemed to be, steadying him with a gentle touch.

“You’ve been reckless tonight, Will,” he said quietly, so low that only the mechanic would hear.

“Yeah?” asked Will. “Well you’ve been annoying.” The wine had loosened his tongue a little too much.

“Have I?” asked Mr. Lecter.

“You planned it,” Will accused, gesturing to the bloodstains on the floor. “You wanted this to happen.”

“And yet it was your hand which inflicted the damage.”

The mechanic laughed. The absurdity of his predicament was so dire it was almost hilarious. Trapped inside the Chesapeake Manor with Mr. Lecter - a man who seemingly wanted to kill him and covet him simultaneously. “You’re good. So good nobody sees you coming. I didn’t see you coming.”

“I should take that as a compliment,” his employer replied. Mr. Lecter picked up the hand Will had used to stab Antony, running curious fingers along the veins, ligaments and tendons. Studying it, as if trying to determine how to reproduce the event.

“You’re never going to let me leave,” said Will. He’d known all along - from the moment he took the job - but the realization struck him with a sudden intensity.

“You are not a captive here, Will,” said Mr. Lecter, looking up and connecting their gazes. He had always seen something dangerous in his employer’s eyes. A morbid curiosity, a riptide, a dark void that wanted to consume the world. He’d been too distracted by the danger to notice their deep, red color. Rich and dark, like a wine that had been aging since the Renaissance.

“If I’m not a captive then I should be allowed into the city,” he said slowly, struggling to form coherent thoughts when faced with Mr. Lecter’s direct attention.

“You are quite free to visit Wolf Trap.”

“Am I?” mused Will. “You won't follow me there with some bullshit excuse about running an errand?”

Mr. Lecter hummed, tightening his grip. “Careful, Will.”

The mechanic looked away, beginning to feel overwhelmed. Mr. Lecter was too close, and his hand felt like it was burning where they touched. The lingering fever from that afternoon combined with his copious drinking didn’t help matters.

“Perhaps it is time to get some rest,” suggested his employer. Mr. Lecter dropped his hand and began to collect their dinner plates.

Will fought down the lump in his throat. It was stupid to grow reliant on Mr. Lecter. Utterly stupid. It was all part of the man's scheme to foster co-dependency. The best prisons were the ones with willing prisoners, after all. He knew this, and yet his heart demanded that he reach out and take back Mr. Lecter's hand.

It was Beverly who saved him in the end.

"Will," she said quietly. As if waking from a trance, he turned to see the maid at his side, throwing him a worried look.

"Beverly," he replied. Without another word, she looped an arm through his and led them away from the dinner table. It was almost dream-like the way they stumbled upstairs, Will leaning heavily into Beverly's shoulder.

"Guess I really made a mess of things," he said.

"Yeah, that's one way to put it," she replied.

They came to Will's door, and the maid propped him up against the wall.

"I never should have mentioned Antony," said Beverly. "So I'm not totally blameless."

"None of that was your fault," replied Will, running a tired hand down his face. "I'm not great at being a normal friend."

Beverly smiled at that. "I don't need a normal friend. I just need you to keep your stabbing instincts in check. That's two in one day."

"The first one doesn't count," he pointed out. "I never made contact."

"Do we need to call in Abigail to settle this one?"

"No, no," Will dismissed, smiling. "Fine. Two in one day. I'll work on it."

"That's not the only thing you'll work on," she replied, gesturing to her room. "Tomorrow I expect to see you bright and early fixing my window."

"I have an unavoidable appointment," he said, laughing even as the words left his lips. "Tea with Mr. Lecter, I'm afraid."

"Morning tea?" Beverly demanded. "Will, do you even work here?"

"Officially, yes."

The maid shook her head. "Alright, fine. After you're done serenading each other will you please stop by?"

"I promise," he said. "And we're not *serenading* each other. If anything he's the one instigating this whole thing."

“Sure,” she deadpanned.

Beverly offered him a parting goodbye, then left him to his thoughts. He stood in the hallway for much longer than necessary. The dinner replayed in his mind on a loop, going back to the moment metal sunk into flesh. He almost wished he could do it a second time.

Will turned and faced the bedroom door, then slammed his head against the wood. A dull ache blossomed across his forehead, numbed by the alcohol. He breathed heavily for a moment, feeling disgust rise up in the back of his throat. He lurched forward and slammed into the door a second time. The world turned fuzzy, and he registered something wet dripping into his dark curls. His body slumped to the floor, exhausted. Mr. Lecter hadn't demanded a penance, but his conscious certainly did.

Dreams began to crawl out of the darkness and latch onto him, dragging him into unconsciousness. He swore a creature was stepping towards him... the one he’d seen before with the charcoal face and long antlers. It watched him with black, unseeing eyes. Crawling closer, closer...

Cold hands gripped his face. He shuddered as the world disappeared, and water began to rise up his ankles, then to his knees, up to his stomach -

Will looked down, only to find it wasn’t water drowning him. He was standing in a river of blood.

Chapter 11

At some point in the night, Will became aware of warm hands on his face. He didn't have the energy to open his eyes, but the sensation prickled his frayed nerves. A thumb brushed along his cheek, lingering there for a moment before pulling back. Then a hand gently combed through his hair, tucking errant curls behind his ears. He felt rather like someone's beloved pet.

Without warning, he found himself lifted off the ground. He moaned, feeling his stomach slosh at the movement. Any more and he'd be throwing up on whoever had decided to scrape him off the floor.

His mind went to Beverly, but the touch was all wrong. Beverly would never take the time to fix his hair. She would have elbowed him in the ribs and shouted his name until he responded. Whoever had him now was surprisingly gentle.

He heard the door to his room open, and the shuffle of blankets as the comforter was pulled back. Someone lowered him onto the bed, then pulled the sheets up to his shoulders. It all felt entirely surreal, given he had yet to open his eyes and everything felt like a dream. This was a nice one for a change.

Will expected his unseen companion to leave, but he heard no indication of footsteps retreating into the hall. Were they watching him? It was almost enough to wake up. But the cocoon of warmth was lulling him back into unconsciousness, and the thought of death didn't scare him enough to investigate the matter.

The hangover that hit him in the morning was unbelievable.

"How much did I drink last night?" he muttered. Will stumbled across the room and hastily closed the blinds. He barely staved off a gag at the thought of breakfast, only to remember that Mr. Lecter expected him for tea.

"Jesus Christ," he said, quickly throwing on the same pants he'd worn yesterday and a scrunched up t-shirt that smelled like old luggage.

The headache from last night had abated somewhat, but the excessive drinking hadn't exactly worked in his favor. He was conscious and alert, and that would have to do for now.

Will stepped into the hall and closed his door. Abigail and Beverly were no doubt already up, so he didn't bother checking their rooms. His feet carried him down the creaky steps and towards a familiar auburn door.

He raised a hand and knocked twice.

At once, the door opened. Mr. Lecter greeted him with a featherlight smile, seeming quite happy this morning. He was dressed, as usual, in an expensive suit that probably cost a small fortune. Will eyed his paisley tie, wondering just how creative he'd have to get to choke the man with it.

"You seem distracted this morning, Will."

He quickly looked away, then said, "I have a lot to think about."

"Yes, I imagine so," Mr. Lecter replied, stepping aside so Will could enter.

The mechanic slowly crossed the threshold. He recognized Mr. Lecter's mahogany desk and velvet chair from their first meeting, as they were the most prominent pieces of furniture in the room. He hadn't noticed the small library in the back, full of books with aging, washed-out covers, and spines that bore titles written in some other language. He squinted, trying to make out the shape of the letters to determine their origin. Before he could make much of an effort, Mr. Lecter was placing a guiding hand on his elbow, and maneuvering him to the chair opposite his desk.

"How are you feeling?" his employer asked. He was now sitting in the plush, velvet chair. He looked rather regal in such a position.

Will hastily dismissed the thought, and considered the question at hand. It was innocuous - one that should have had a simple answer like *good* or *doing fine.* But he wasn't fine at all, and they both knew it. Lying would only sour the conversation.

"Tired," he said. Truthful but unrevealing.

"I expected as much," said Mr. Lecter. "You must have done quite a number on your liver. With such habits you'll be committing yourself to an early grave."

"At least a drunk death is a peaceful one," said Will.

His mind wandered back in time, reluctantly remembering the numerous faces of the victims he'd studied while working for Jack. Sure, they always saved one or two at the end of a case. But what about the dozen before them? The ones whose only purpose was to provide Will a pattern to work from. Reduced to blurry photos and transcripted words. Their memories were tainted, attached to their killer even after death.

Will idly wondered if it would be the same with him and Mr. Lecter.

"Peaceful compared to certain deaths, perhaps," the man replied. "But most would not consider it a happy ending." Mr. Lecter spoke of death the way people talked about the weather, the words passing between them mindlessly as his employer moved to fetch a kettle.

Will had almost forgotten they were supposed to be drinking tea.

“Some people don’t get a happy ending,” said Will, accepting a warm, steaming cup. It was the same tea they had enjoyed the last time the mechanic visited.

He stared down at the offering, pausing for a moment. He’d never seen a tea quite like the one Mr. Lecter brewed. It had a yellowish hue, and had an intoxicating smell of lemony mint. It reminded him strikingly of the Angel’s Trumpet he’d stumbled upon in the garden.

Will suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a disturbing realization.

“I’m not familiar with the plant,” he admitted.

“It’s not found in many gardens,” said Mr. Lecter. “People are wary of its effects.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing at all,” Lecter replied, turning to look at him. “Only that you shouldn’t eat one.”

The meat wasn’t poisoned. Will almost laughed, realizing that he had been right, in a sense. Mr. Lecter would never do anything to taint his precious meals. The real culprit was right under his nose.

He cleared his throat, then placed the cup on Mr. Lecter’s desk.

His employer watched him carefully, but said nothing of the discarded tea. “Do you feel yourself undeserving of a happy ending, Will?”

The mechanic leaned back, relaxed now that he had puzzled out Mr. Lecter’s ruse. It was somewhat gratifying to unearth his methods. It made the man across from him seem far more human.

Will shrugged in response to the question, but offered, “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’ll either get a happy ending or I won’t.”

Mr. Lecter hummed. “We are often dealt cruel fates. If we acquiesce to life as its presented we will always be disappointed. It is sometimes necessary to fashion part of the world in our own image.”

“Isn’t the world fashioned in God’s image?” quipped Will.

“Quite so,” his employer agreed, an intrigued look in his eyes. “Do you like how God has fashioned the world, Will?”

The mechanic kept his gaze trained on the man’s suit, far away from Mr. Lecter. The question seemed intimate, although he couldn’t place why.

“I don’t see anything divine about it,” he said shortly.

“No,” Mr. Lecter agreed. “Divinity is a rather human creation. Formed by the need for purpose. Most people are not creative enough to invent a purpose for themselves. They must

cling to old scriptures and fears of sin to keep their minds sufficiently occupied, and distracted from their own existence."

"I wouldn't say all that in town," Will replied. "They'll call you an atheist."

"I've certainly been called worse."

Will laughed despite himself. It had been a long time since someone had engaged him to speak about anything philosophical. It reminded him of college professors and late night essays on ethics and morality. Mr. Lecter's view was a refreshing take on the theological teachings populating most schools.

He finally looked up, only to catch Mr. Lecter staring at him with a truly indescribable expression. Will couldn't tell if he was passionately tormented or warmly content. His eyes seemed to flicker between the two, unable to decide. Or perhaps, unable to allow himself to feel anything more than content.

"I should probably get going," said Will, releasing the man from his internal struggle. "Beverly will have me in the gutter if I don't fix her window."

"Ms. Katz is quite the force," Mr. Lecter agreed.

They both stood, and Will made his way to the door. His hand lingered on the handle, pricking with the awareness of Mr. Lecter behind him.

"Please ensure you provide Franklyn with any items that need to be sourced from town for Abigail's desk," his employer added. His voice was smooth and rich, and all too close.

Will nodded stiffly as a light tremor began to work its way through his body. It was maddening how tightly Mr. Lecter controlled the electric current running through his body. As if the man could simply flick a switch and send his nerves blazing.

"Right," he muttered, opening the door and letting himself out.

It was cold as he entered the hall. Mr. Lecter was only a few feet away, separated by a practically non-existent barrier, and yet it seemed like oceans apart.

Chapter 12

He owed a debt to Beverly for keeping him distracted. She was the lighthouse guiding his wayward ship back to shore; even if that meant spending his morning crouched down on the floor cleaning the tracks and oiling the rollers on her sliding glass window.

“This is nice,” he offered, waving a hand at the small balcony. His hands were busy with a rag, clearing away years of dirt and debris.

Beverly shrugged. “It’s better than your room.”

Will chuckled and dunked the rag in a bucket of water. He squeezed out the dirt and grime, then resumed his cleaning. “Yeah, guess it is.”

The maid hopped up on the bed, kicking her legs back and forth. “So what are we going to do about this dinner party?”

“I don’t think there’s much we can do,” replied the mechanic.

Now that the tracks were clean he could actually see the silver metal hiding underneath. He grabbed a can of white lithium grease and sprayed a small amount on the central rod between the two lower frames. Will stood, then began to repeatedly open and close the sliding glass door, allowing the grease to lubricate the inner roller.

“It’s pretty clear why he invited you,” she said, with no small amount of insinuation. “But what’s the point in having me tag along?”

“Mr. Lecter likes playing games,” said Will. His thoughts jumped to innocuous cups of tea and hallucinations of roaring waters. “He gets a kick out of it.”

“So this is some kind of power play between you two?”

“Not a power play,” he corrected. “More like an experiment. He’s casting lines in the water, testing out different bait.”

Beverly sighed and jumped off the bed, moving to stand beside him. “Are you sure we should be playing Mr. Lecter’s games?”

“I wasn’t under the impression we had a choice.”

“I’m worried about you, Will,” she admitted. He reluctantly looked at Beverly, who seemed equally uncomfortable broaching the subject. “I trust Mr. Lecter, but I don’t trust him when it comes to you.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he said, slowly packing up his things and throwing them back in the toolkit.

“You do,” she responded. “You don’t trust him either. I haven’t forgotten what you told me… that you’re worried about adapting for Mr. Lecter.”

“I’m already adapting for him,” said Will. The words sounded bitter. Almost detached, as if his mind had already surrendered to the ambush.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

Will’s head snapped up. “What am I supposed to do? He won’t let me go.”

“You could quit,” said Beverly. She looked entirely too serious with her brows drawn tight and her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. “Maybe you should quit.”

“Do you want me to quit?” he asked.

“I want what’s best for you,” she said, deflecting her gaze out the window. “Maybe I don’t know what’s best, and that’s fine, but something isn’t right. You know it.”

“Yeah I know it,” he said softly. There were no words he could use to accurately describe his relationship with Mr. Lecter. It certainly wasn’t that of employer and employee. That would be far too impersonal. Yet that was the only formal relationship they had. The only one written on paper and public for the world to see. Whatever else passed between them happened between the lines and off the books.

“This should be fixed,” he said, showing Beverly how the window now opened and shut with ease. No more cold nights with air seeping through the cracks. Her room was now sealed off from the elements, protected against the night.

“Thanks,” she offered. Beverly’s eyes sought his, and he met them only for a moment, offering the maid a tentative smile. “You’re a pretty good mechanic, Graham.”

“If things don’t work out maybe you can write me a recommendation,” he quipped.

“Consider it done,” she replied.

The two offered each other a parting nod before Will left Beverly’s room, returning to his own. He dropped the toolkit to the floor with a *thump,* then collapsed on his bed. He needed to stop by Abigail’s room next, but the task felt all too weighty.

He vividly remembered Antony’s blood staining her pale skin, and the glazed, distant look in the poor girl’s eyes as she ate her dinner. He only hoped Matthew was making some progress with piecing together her mother’s death. Part of him hoped the whole endeavor would be fruitless, knowing that the trail would inevitably lead back to Mr. Lecter. Life would be boring without him. The other part of him hoped Matthew would put all the puzzle pieces in their place, connecting each dot, making each missing element line up. Abigail deserved justice more than he deserved happiness.

What a strange thing , Will thought. Even knowing the man was actively baiting him, hoping to transform him into something terrible, Will couldn’t bring himself to hate Mr. Lecter. There would always be a monster in his chest. Only now Mr. Lecter was approaching its

cage, tempting the beast with succulent meals and promises of wild hunts. He was whispering to the long forgotten and often neglected parts of his mind - the ones he had tried to bury after leaving Baltimore.

The mechanic let out a strangled breath and buried his head in his hands. His forehead still ached from last night. In retrospect, he probably shouldn't have slammed his head against the door, rattling his alcohol-addled brain. A concussion was the last thing he needed.

Will forced himself to leave the safety of bed, grabbing his tools and making for the door. The day wasn't getting any longer, and he needed to help Abigail before dinner. Especially since all his hardware orders would have to go through *Franklyn* now.

The mechanic approached her door and gave it a tentative knock, unsure if Abigail would even be in her room at this time in the afternoon. He eyed the maroon flowers decorating her door, and couldn't help associating them with the auburn shade of the entryway to Mr. Lecter's study. In many ways, Abigail and Mr. Lecter mirrored each other. Though in many ways they did not. They fit together imperfectly.

The door cracked open, and wide eyes peeked out. "Will?"

"Hey," he offered, hoping that he looked as non-threatening as possible. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," she said quietly, opening the door all the way and allowing him entry.

Abigail's room was nicer than his or Beverly's. It wasn't exactly *fancy* but it was certainly spacious, allowing the girl ample room to move around. He noted two bookshelves propped up next to each other, both overflowing with annotated texts and bookmarked pages. The titles included several classics, like Bradbury, Kafka, and Orwell. There were some books he didn't recognize, written in the same markings he'd found in Mr. Lecter's study. Those volumes were carefully tucked in the back, as if wary of searching eyes.

Like Beverly, she had a balcony. But unlike the other maid this balcony was large enough to comfortably fit three or more people, and he found himself wondering if Mr. Lecter ever joined her there during warm afternoons, each reading their own novels and adding notes in the margins, having long conversations about the nature of the works.

"This is the kit," she said, directing him to a dusty package on the floor. It had already been partially opened, revealing slabs of dark wood and rusted screws. "I don't know if there's any point in saving it, but Hannibal wants to."

Will almost jumped at the name. It was the first time he'd heard someone call Mr. Lecter that - and it seemed rather telling that Abigail was being so informal with him.

"I'm sure we can make something of it," he said, bending down and inspecting the parts, beginning to catalog what needed replacing. The screws, certainty. They were practically orange with caked on rust. The wood was in decent shape, though he planned on adding an order of rubber casings to Franklyn's list. Mr. Lecter wouldn't be happy if the desk legs scraped against the floor every time it was moved.

“I know what we needed,” said Will after a few minutes of mental note-taking. “After Franklyn makes a trip to town I can get this put together. Shouldn’t take more than a day.”

“Alright,” she agreed, wrapping thin arms around her torso.

The mechanic fiddled with his hands. He wanted to apologize for last night, but lacked the right words. There wasn’t a generic, off-handed way to make amends for stabbing someone and then forcing a young girl to clean up the mess.

“I’m sorry about dinner,” he eventually said. “I shouldn’t have put you in that situation.”

The girl had a ghostly smile on her lips as she replied, “That wasn’t my first time seeing blood, Will. I’ve been trained to handle much worse.”

“He shouldn’t be training you like that,” Will replied, his brow furrowing.

“Maybe not,” she said, skimming a hand along the soft, velvet sheets on top of her mattress. There was a small rabbit tucked next to her pillow, almost hidden beneath it. Probably worried about becoming consumed by a nearby predator. “But it comes in handy.”

The mechanic hummed, his leg bobbing up and down subconsciously. He couldn’t deny that training like that could come in handy. Mr. Lecter was teaching her the kinds of things that might have saved the victims whose pictures he studied on newspaper clippings, happy and smiling and entirely unaware of the danger coming for them.

“You’re a lot alike,” said Abigail, her quiet voice ringing throughout the silent room. “I think he likes that about you… the fact that you have something to hide. Something you don’t want to show him.”

“He takes a keen satisfaction in revealing and nurturing morbid thoughts,” said Will, a humorless chuckle escaping his lips. “He’s just curious to see what I’ll do.”

“Maybe you should be less tempting,” she offered, smiling a little. “He wants your brain, Will. Your thoughts. There’s an advantage in having something he wants.”

She was right, of course. He had the distinct advantage of being interesting. An advantage which he should probably capitalize on now, before Mr. Lecter inevitably found something more entertaining to play with.

“I would give you some advice in return, but you know more than I do,” replied Will. “You already have him fooled with dinner. Though I doubt you’ll tell me what’s actually wrong with the meat.”

Abigail only shrugged, and looked out the window. “You’ll find out.”

Will sighed and grabbed his toolkit, offering the girl a parting nod. She returned it, her face partially obscured by a curtain of long, dark hair. He took his leave and closed the door behind him, opting to return to his room before engaging Franklyn about the shopping order. He didn’t feel like seeing the man’s giddy face.

Once back in his room, Will kicked off his shoes and socks. Rather than rest on the bed, he opted to lay on the floor with his head angled towards the window, catching the afternoon sun. It felt good to be alone for a minute without having to worry about other people's agendas. There were too many shifting variables at the manor, all of them constantly demanding his attention. His brain needed a rest, if only for a minute.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween! 🎃

It was a miracle Will didn't pass out on the floor and miss the rest of the afternoon. Such incidents were, unfortunately, not uncommon for him. He would never be able to live down Jack finding him huddled on the ground next to the bins in the Baltimore PD break room. At the time he was half out of his mind trying to track down a murderer known for cutting off his victims' thumbs, and being near a trash can was non-negotiable.

But such days were long behind him. At least until he had solid proof of whatever sadistic activities Mr. Lecter got up to in his free time. It seemed laughable, building a court case against the man. His employer had the advantage of being entirely unsuspecting, overly polite, and outwardly generous. Nobody would suspect him of anything. After all, who wants to believe their neighbor could be capable of such things?

The mechanic eventually rallied himself from the floor and trudged down the creaky steps to the first floor. He didn't feel like speaking with Franklyn, but an order needed to be placed, and he had nothing better to do.

"Will," the butler greeted, standing post by the door. "Have you spoken with Abigail?"

"Yeah," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "We need four black rubber leg caps and two boxes of the 1 inch screws, 20 pieces each."

Franklyn took a moment to digest his response, looking desperate for a piece of paper. "Right…er… yes, just let me find something to record that…"

"I'll leave you to it," said Will, heading for the kitchen. He had to restrain a laugh at the half-shocked noise Franklyn made behind him. Although he couldn't see the man's face, he was sure the butler looked petrified. No doubt afraid to make a mess of his first assignment.

"Wait! Ehm… Will? Couldn't you stay for just a moment? I promise it'll just be -"

"I'm afraid I really have to go," Will apologized, turning around and flashing him a wolfy smile. "But I've already given you everything you need."

Franklyn swallowed, then fidgeted with his hands for a moment before eventually relenting, saying, "Yes, of course. I'll let you know when I return from town."

"Say hi to Matthew for me," the mechanic replied. "And tell him he was right."

“Didn’t think I’d see you back here.”

“I’m not being held captive,” Will replied dryly.

“We both know the manor staff don’t hang around town,” Matthew replied. He leaned back against the check-out counter, then asked, “You jail break?”

He doubted the butler would pass on the message, but it was worth a shot. Will took his leave and snuck off to the kitchen, enjoying the smell of fresh bread. He was half tempted to steal something from the pantry, but ultimately refrained. He had the distinct sense that Mr. Lecter would find it incredibly rude for him to consume a meal that hadn’t been meticulously crafted by his own hand. The man was full of absurdities.

But there was a more pressing matter, as it seemed this afternoon was destined to be interrupted by unwanted company.

“Will!” Frederick all but shouted, clutching his chest in surprise. This was their second time meeting in the kitchen, and somehow they had only become less amicable.

“Frederick.”

“I didn’t expect to see you roaming about in here,” Frederick said, attempting to resume an air of nonchalance. He fixed his bowtie and straightened his posture, quickly transforming into the picture of a dignified professional. Will supposed it was the man’s job to look stuffy and important, since his revenue depended on convincing other people to make a fuss over their appearance.

“I had some time to kill,” he replied. His mind flashed back to the way Frederick’s hands had quivered in his pockets upon witnessing the brutal spectacle he’d made of Antony. It was almost enticing to think about what he could do to make it happen again.

The mechanic paused, and quickly discarded the thought. He was starting to adopt Mr. Lecter’s brand of curiosity.

“Will? You look rather pale.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted, resuming their conversation. “What are you doing here, anyways? I doubt Mr. Lecter needs alterations to his suits every week.”

“I’m here for you, actually.”

The words were almost menacing, although perhaps he was imagining it. The pleased look on Frederick’s face certainty made it seem like he had the upper hand. When exactly did that shift occur? Wasn’t it the tailor who had shied away from him at dinner, fearful at the prospect of handling such a turbulent client?

Will nearly groaned. His head was full of too many thoughts, and he was beginning to regret not returning to his room immediately.

“I don’t need a suit.”

“You do, actually,” said Frederick, eying him up and down. “A good one, too. I presume this will be your first dinner party, so let me inform you that Mr. Lecter is known for inviting distinguished guests. They will expect you to look and behave a certain way.”

“I’m not letting you dress me up like a peacock,” Will said darkly, his mood quickly souring. “I don’t care what Mr. Lecter says.”

A low, soft laugh echoed from behind him.

“I certainly didn’t mean to set you in such a bad mood, Will.”

He jumped, fruitlessly trying to quell the embarrassment creeping up his neck. Will found himself suddenly rooted to the spot, incapable of turning around to greet the owner of that unmistakable voice.

“It will be a painless process,” Frederick assured with a smug look. “I will take your measurements and find something appealing for you to wear. Navy, of course. Nothing untraditional. You will blend in seamlessly.”

Mr. Lecter moved forward, coming to stand at Will’s right. The mechanic could feel his heavy gaze lingering, but was helpless to do anything about it.

“Perhaps a lapel,” Mr. Lecter suggested. “It would hardly be fitting to have Will become lost among the crowd. The petals of an Angel’s Trumpet would suit nicely.”

Will’s eyes finally popped up to meet Mr. Lecter’s. His employer stared back unabashedly, yet revealed nothing. *What the hell was he playing at?*

“The petals of an Angel’s Trumpet,” Frederick repeated, looking between the two of them. “Certainly an odd request…”

The mechanic folded his arms across his chest, feeling powerless. Mr. Lecter had quite literally hand-picked his entire outfit, dishing out orders to Frederick as if it were entirely natural for him to make decisions on Will’s behalf.

“Would you excuse us for a moment, Frederick? I will return Will to you momentarily,” he said, smoothly guiding them out of the kitchen and down the hall. Mr. Lecter opened the door to his study and ushered him inside.

“What is this about?” Will asked tentatively. He didn’t like being whisked away without explanation.

“You looked upset,” Mr. Lecter replied, taking his usual seat and gesturing for Will to do the same. “I thought it might be beneficial for us to take a moment of respite.”

The mechanic gave a stilted laugh, then said, “You brought me here to… cool down?”

“You are welcome to return to the kitchen whenever you like,” Mr. Lecter offered, folding his hands together.

Will begrudgingly took his seat, reminding himself that the dinner party was just a formality. A gilded night of expensive champagne and meaningless conversations where Baltimore socialites gathered to spread gossip and flaunt their accomplishments. Mr. Lecter would no doubt have his hands full with coordinating the menu and entertaining hordes of *distinguished guests.* With any luck he would be able to ride out the night tucked away in a back corner getting blind drunk with Beverly.

“Am I boring you, Will?”

“No, sorry,” he said, rubbing his eyes and returning to the present.

Mr. Lecter leaned forward, then asked, “Perhaps there is something on your mind?”

“Nothing important,” Will said with a dismissive hand-wave. “I’m just thinking about the dinner party.”

“Your thoughts on the matter are quite important,” his employer replied. “Are you troubled at the prospect of attending?”

“I don’t have much in common with the people on the guest list,” quipped Will. “Other than Beverly.”

“Ms. Katz is certain to brighten the evening,” said Mr. Lecter. “As are you.”

“Oh sure,” he said. “I’m just a pleasure to have at dinner.”

“Are you concerned that Antony will be in attendance?”

Will’s eye twitched before he could stop it. He quickly schooled his expression, trying to mask the way his blood pressure spiked at the mention of the footman. *You’re only playing into Hannibal’s hand. Shit! Mr. Lecter, not Hannibal. I’m not calling him that.*

“I’m sure he will be recovered by then,” replied Will.

“Yes, I’m sure he will be.”

They fell into a mutual silence, ending that line of conversation. The mechanic didn’t want to return to Frederick’s waiting hands, but lounging around in Mr. Lecter’s study wasn’t exactly the most *relaxing* activity. Every word exchanged between them felt like some kind of sparring match, landing blows or blocking attacks. Half the time Will didn’t even know if he was winning. He was practically blind in the ring, trying to dodge punches in the dark.

“Are you in need of further assignments?” Mr. Lecter eventually asked.

“I have some time.”

His employer considered this for a moment, then said, “Behind the house there is a small boat in need of assessment. I would like someone to inspect its condition prior to use.”

“What size boat are we talking?” asked Will, his interest piqued.

“A class one, I believe.”

Will nodded, feeling the gears in his brain begin to spin. He was finally getting a mechanical job rather than acting as Mr. Lecter’s de facto handyman. A boat repair, too. That was a treat. Maybe he could convince his employer that a test run was necessary for assessing its condition out on the lake…

“I’ll check it out,” he replied quickly. His excitement must have been palpable to Mr. Lecter, for the man was staring at him rather fondly.

“I should return you to Frederick,” Mr. Lecter said after a long moment. “It would be rude to keep him waiting.”

The mechanic nodded, and slowly got up. “I guess I’ll see you at dinner.”

“I look forward to it, Will.”

Chapter 14

His session with Frederick was nothing short of torture. The man had insisted on whipping out his fabric tape measure and taking all sorts of readings. They started with his neck, of course. The tailor took his ugly yellow tool and wrapped it around his throat, just below the Adam's apple. It felt more like a noose than a measuring tape.

Frederick then proceeded to measure his shoulders, following his back's curvature and measuring from one shoulder joint to the other. Will was forced to raise both arms above his head when the tailor sought to measure his chest, and then hold them out when the man wanted to take a measurement from his shoulder joint to his wrist bone. The whole thing felt almost clinical.

"That should do it," said Frederick, packing up his tape measure. "I'll have a suit ready in two weeks, just before Mr. Lecter's dinner party."

"Great," said Will, feeling as if he'd just been violated for the past thirty minutes.

"Your image I can fix, but your manners could use some work," replied the tailor, looking entirely too haughty. "I suppose that's Mr. Lecter's area of expertise."

"He's not polite," said Will. "He's playing with you, and you mistake it for politeness."

Frederick paused, assessing the statement. He had that familiar look - the one Will had caught upon their first meeting. A kind of muted curiosity, but one that would never reach the depths of Mr. Lecter's. "You believe he's wearing some kind of mask?"

"I don't think he hides it at all," the mechanic replied. "But he operates on a different wavelength. One that you can't see or hear."

"And you just happen to be the lucky radio operator turned into his frequency?"

"I wouldn't call it lucky."

The tailor chuckled to himself, slinging a leather bag over his shoulder. "You're certainly a mystery, Mr. Graham. Perhaps that's why he's kept you on."

"It might benefit you to be more interesting," replied Will.

He turned and left the kitchen before the man could muster up a reply. The mechanic was already on edge, and he didn't feel like being around the tailor any longer than strictly necessary. Especially not when he could still feel the man's hands touching him, assessing, turning him *this way* and *that way* , inspecting him like some sort of zoo animal.

Will needed to get out, and Mr. Lecter had conveniently arranged for his next assignment to be outdoors. Sometimes he hated the man. Hated that he seemed to be aware of Will's needs, even predicting them. It felt worse than Frederick's ministrations. It was like being sliced

open and dissected. His employer knew too much, had too much leverage, possessing all the tools and skills necessary to arrange Will's life in whichever way he wanted.

Beverly's voice, ever his beacon of reason, piped up in the back of his head.

"Maybe you should quit."

"Something isn't right. You know it."

Maybe he should quit, while that was still an option. Was it still an option? He found himself unable to predict what Mr. Lecter would do if he handed in a letter of resignation during their morning tea. Perhaps his employer would try a series of probing questions designed to make him doubt the decision, roping him back into compliance. Perhaps he would simply kill Will then and there, in a final act of possession.

He tried not to ruminate on all the ghastly possibilities as he exited the manor and went around back. He was surprised to find that Mr. Lecter owned a small fishing boat. He really couldn't imagine the man actually getting inside one. Surely being out on the water would ruin his fine suits. But his employer was full of contradictions, and this must be one of them.

Will started by doing a visual inspection of the hull, looking for damage on the rub rail, stress cracks, and worn out components. As he went through his usual checklist, the mechanic found himself baffled. Had Mr. Lecter just purchased this boat? It was in pristine condition. He climbed inside to do an engine compartment check, inspecting the hoses and belt, then checking for signs of rust and corrosion. His eyes went to the battery, confirming that the terminals were clean and the wiring was in good condition. It was as if the boat had come straight from the factory and plopped itself into Mr. Lecter's yard.

He climbed back out and stared at the vehicle, hands on his hips. Was this another test? Had Mr. Lecter done something to this boat that only Will could puzzle out? Or perhaps he was reading too much into it. After all, his employer had never said this was a used boat. The man might have purchased it just before Will came to the manor. It was plausible.

The mechanic was almost disappointed at the lack of a challenge.

Will looked up at the manor, considering his next move. He was fresh out of assignments and it was only three o'clock. Abigail and Beverly were no doubt busy with their own tasks, and Franklyn was off in town. He had no interest in re-engaging Frederick, if the man was even still on the premises. That left Antony and Mr. Lecter.

The footman had been steadfastly avoiding him since their tumultuous dinner, and Will hadn't caught sight of his ridiculous maroon coat in the halls. There was no indication he lived on the second floor with the rest of the servants, which was curious. It nagged at his brain as he tried to puzzle out where the man could be hiding. Not that it mattered, of course.

The mechanic decided to leave Antony off his plans, not allowing the footman to take up any more space in his mind.

Which left Mr. Lecter. Before the thought could even reach his brain, Will resolved not to show up at the man's study. They had already seen quite a bit of each other today, and another meeting would be all too much. No, he would make the most of the free time.

His feet began to wander on their own accord, heading towards the woods. He didn't try to resist. It reminded him of walking with Beverly into town, chatting about fashion catalogs and idle gossip, pretending to be normal people. Well, Beverly was a normal person. It wasn't exactly pretending for her.

Thankfully it was a warm and sunny day, lingering somewhere in the high 70's. Just hot enough to be enjoyable, but not so hot that he would sweat through his clothes.

The entrance to the woods could be described as *ominous* . The trees were dense and clustered together, their warped branches extending outwards, as if to drag its prey inside. He didn't mind it all that much. At least the forest was clear about its intentions, whereas the manor put up all kinds of facades and elaborate traps.

Will let himself relax as he stepped past the treeline and entered the woods. It was quieter and more friendly than appearances would make it seem. He wandered in the semi-darkness, looking up to the treetops and searching for the patches of light. It felt a bit like entering an enchanted forest, where suddenly the world would turn monochrome, or the birds would begin to talk, or he would lose himself to madness. The last was the most probable.

After a while of meandering the grounds, he sat down on a log and extended his feet, listening to the soft chirping of blue jays and the rustle of squirrels digging through a pile of leaves. It would be nice to spend an evening in the woods with a proper camping pack and supplies. The thought of sleeping nearer to the open air and the stars tugged at his chest. Sometimes the manor could feel all too suffocating.

He almost didn't notice the piece of cloth hanging from a nearby bush, swaying gently with the breeze. Will stood and approached it, his eyes sharpening as he registered an unmistakable blood stain marring the plaid fabric. Torn from a shirt, most likely. Someone had been running for their life and accidentally left part of themselves behind.

He didn't know the victim, but he could guess the predator. It was all too suspicious… all fingers pointing in the same direction. This was the first tangible piece of evidence he had linking a disturbance to Mr. Lecter's property.

If it were anyone else, he would head into town and phone Jack straight away. They weren't friends anymore, but the man knew better than to ignore his calls. He would come.

Perhaps if things get bad. Will took the cloth and stuffed it in his pocket, making a note to hide it somewhere safe.

The mechanic began to wander back the same way he came, searching for familiar landmarks and using them to navigate back to the tree line. It took him longer than he liked, but eventually he reached his destination.

Will came out of the woods and stared at the Chesapeake Manor, realizing that his first impression had been entirely correct. He was standing in the jaws of a hungry lion.

End Notes

Thanks for reading!

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